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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL CONCERNING THE SITUATION IN ABKHAZIA, GEORGIA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to resolution 1150 (1998) of 30 January 1998, by which the Security Council decided to extend the mandate of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) until 31 July 1998, subject to a review by the Council of the mandate of UNOMIG in the event of any changes that might be made in the mandate or in the presence of the peacekeeping force of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In the same resolution, the Council requested me to continue to keep it regularly informed and to report after three months from the date of the adoption of the resolution on the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, including the operations of UNOMIG, and to provide recommendations in that report on the nature of the United Nations presence. In compliance with that request, I submitted a report to the Security Council on 11 May (see S/1998/375 and Add.1). In addition, pursuant to the statement by the President of the Security Council of 28 May 1998 (S/PRST/1998/16), I submitted on 10 June a report (S/1998/497) providing an update on developments in the region and containing, as requested, the results of my Special Representative's consultations with both sides in the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict on the concept of the self-protection unit outlined in my report of 11 May (S/1998/375) and on other options as appropriate. The present report provides an update of the situation as at 12 July 1998.

II. POLITICAL ASPECTS

2. During the reporting period, efforts by my Special Representative, Mr. Liviu Bota, the Russian Federation, in its capacity as facilitator, with the assistance of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the group of Friends of the Secretary-General to move the peace process forward were negatively affected by the hostilities and subsequent events in the Gali district in late May (see S/1998/497, paras. 2-8).

3. With the joint mediation of the First Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Executive Secretary of CIS, the sides continued extensive negotiation efforts on a set of two documents ("Agreement on

Peace and Guarantees for the Prevention of Armed Confrontation", and the "Protocol on the Return of Refugees to the Gali District and Measures for Economic Rehabilitation") in preparation for a meeting between the President of Georgia, Mr. Eduard Shevardnadze, and the Abkhaz leader, Mr. Vladislav Ardzinba (see S/1998/497, para. 8).

4. To date, however, the sides have not agreed on key points of the Protocol: (a) the definition of the "Gali district" (since the Abkhaz have redrawn the administrative-territorial boundaries of districts in Abkhazia); (b) the means by which the provision and guarantee of security for those returning to the Gali district ought to be accomplished; and (c) the nature and timing of the measures for economic rehabilitation, including the lifting of the restrictions imposed by the 19 December 1994 Decree of the Government of the Russian Federation and the 19 January 1996 decision of the CIS Council of Heads of State (see A/51/62-S/1996/74 of 31 January 1996, annex).

5. While the above-mentioned efforts proceeded, my Special Representative was actively engaged in direct consultations with President Shevardnadze, Mr. Ardzinba and other prominent political figures. Each leader continued to express willingness to meet with the other to address current problems and explore avenues for the settlement of the conflict. Each also expressed deep concern about the volatile situation on the ground. Mr. Ardzinba warned that the situation was at a crossroads, and that if some accord were not found, the situation could rapidly deteriorate. Upon his request, my Special Representative conveyed these concerns to the Georgian side.

6. In addition, on 16 June, the members of the group of Friends of the Secretary-General met with President Shevardnadze in Tbilisi and, on 17 June, with Mr. Ardzinba in Sukhumi, at his invitation. In each case, they made collective démarches appealing to both sides to resume discussions within the institutional framework agreed upon during the high-level meeting held at Geneva in November 1997 (see S/1998/5', para. 3).

7. Furthermore, in a letter dated 15 June, President Shevardnadze requested that the President of the Russian Federation, Mr. Boris Yeltsin, in his capacity as Chairman of the CIS Council of Heads of State, to convene an extraordinary session of the Council to address the situation in Abkhazia, Georgia.

8. Both sides continue to show interest in direct bilateral contacts and cooperation. Assisted logistically by UNOMIG, the Executive Secretary of the Georgian/Abkhaz Bilateral Joint Commission, Mr. Zurab Lakerbaia, travelled frequently between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. From 28 to 30 June, Abkhaz businessman Mr. Enver Kapba paid a visit to Tbilisi to discuss options for Georgian-Abkhaz economic cooperation.

9. On 27 June, participants in the Russian-Georgian Working Group on Border Questions initialled an agreement on procedures for the transfer from the Russian Federation to Georgia of control of the borders and ownership of surface infrastructure (see S/1998/375, para. 9). The Abkhaz announced their intention to assume control of maritime borders, once the Russian border guards had withdrawn. Head of the Georgian State Border Guard Department, Major General Valerii Chkheidze, visited Sukhumi on 10 July and discussed this sensitive issue

which, if not resolved, might cause new armed hostilities. Reportedly, further talks are planned.

10. On 24 June, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted a resolution on the necessity of normalizing the border and customs regime on the Abkhaz part of the border of the Russian Federation. The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs characterized this resolution as an example of gross interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign State.

III. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

11. Humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable civilians in Abkhazia, Georgia, including the internally displaced persons, was severely disrupted during the reporting period, first by the blockage of the main bridge over the Inguri River (see S/1998/375, paras. 15 and 28), and then by the resumption of armed hostilities in the Gali district in May.

12. The blockade of the bridge seriously impeded the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the most needy; forced the delay of distribution of roof kits and fertilizer to returnees by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); hampered plans by the United Nations Children's Fund to strengthen its immunization programme; and, caused Acción Contra el Hambre (ACH) to reduce the number of recipients of daily food rations to 3,000.

13. Though regular humanitarian activities resumed on 1 May 1998, when the blockade of the bridge was lifted, programmes in support of returnees to the Gali district came to an abrupt halt when hostilities broke out in May. According to updated information, during and immediately after the May hostilities, some 40,000 persons, mostly spontaneous returnees permanently residing in the Gali district, fled across the Inguri River towards Zugdidi. Although hostilities subsided following the parties' signing, on 25 May, of the Protocol on a Ceasefire and Withdrawal of Armed Formations (see S/1998/497, para. 4), looting and burning of houses by Abkhaz militia and armed groups was widespread. UNHCR estimates that some 1,400 private homes were destroyed, including houses recently rebuilt with the assistance of the international community, at a cost of some $2 million. UNOMIG provided logistical support for UNHCR to visit the affected areas and assess the situation.

14. Conditions for those who remain in the Gali district, mostly elderly, have become extremely difficult. Food assistance to the district, which is being undertaken by the International Committee of the Red Cross and ACH, has been hampered by the renewed minelaying of some secondary roads making access to remote villages beyond the main road (known as the M-27) almost impossible. As a result, many beneficiaries remain without assistance. Accordingly, aid agencies have expressed their concerns regarding the situation to the Government of Georgia and to the Abkhaz authorities.

15. Given that the majority of spontaneous returnees to the Gali district again had to flee their homes, UNHCR's focus of operations for serving this population has shifted to the Zugdidi side, and all its international staff members have temporarily vacated the Sukhumi office. Nonetheless, that office, now operated

by local staff, is maintaining a liaison function. Similarly, due to the humanitarian crisis caused by the influx of internally displaced persons on the Zugdidi side, the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has temporarily relocated its base for coordination activities in western Georgia from Sukhumi to Zugdidi.

16. The Human Rights Office in Sukhumi continued its work as mandated, although the recruitment of additional officers by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights was delayed. On 12 July, the new Director of the office arrived.

IV. OPERATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA

17. In accordance with the arrangements described in my report of 10 June (S/1998/497, para. 13), UNOMIG has been conducting limited operations in the Zugdidi and Gali sectors, whereby patrols are undertaken in two mine-protected vehicles at all times and are limited to main roads connecting population centres and checkpoints of the CIS peacekeeping force. Its team bases remain closed and its observers operate from the Zugdidi and Gali sector headquarters (see map). The administrative headquarters have now been relocated from Pitsunda to Sukhumi, and only the transport workshop remains temporarily in Pitsunda. The joining of the Mission's administrative and military headquarters is expected to contribute positively to UNOMIG's effectiveness. The Mission maintains a Liaison Office in Tbilisi.

18. Rotation of military observers, which was suspended in the wake of the 19 February hostage-taking incident (see S/1998/375, para. 24) has now resumed with a view to bringing the strength of the mission to 98 military observers. As at 10 July, the Mission's strength stood at 81 observers (see annex).

19. The administrative difficulties with the Georgian and Russian authorities, which prevented the Mission from using its helicopter support (see S/1998/375, para. 23), have been resolved and the aircraft is being used to patrol inaccessible areas as well as for medical evacuation purposes. It will be recalled that efforts were under way to increase the Mission's mine- and ballistic-protected vehicle fleet. However, given the Organization's financial regulations, the contractual arrangements with the provider took several months to finalize. Such arrangements have now been concluded and the provider has advised us that the first set of vehicles will be produced in the next 90 days.

20. Council members will recall that security measures, such as a revision of UNOMIG's modus operandi and security arrangements, have already been taken by the Mission with the CIS peacekeeping force on both banks of the Inguri River and with the Georgian authorities in the Zugdidi sector. Nonetheless, and although to a reduced extent than previously, UNOMIG's personnel and property continued to be subjected to acts of violence. One such incident took place during the night of 30 April, when one of the Mission's safes was stolen from a guarded location at UNOMIG's previous administrative headquarters in Pitsunda. In addition to the Mission, the local Abkhaz authorities are conducting their own investigation. However, the perpetrators have not yet been identified.

21. The Mission's rapport with the population in the Gali sector has been good and the resumption of its patrolling was warmly welcomed by them. However, elsewhere in Abkhazia, a mass media campaign was launched against UNOMIG, particularly after the May events, thus creating anti-UNOMIG sentiment among the local Abkhaz population. In addition, various Abkhaz authorities initiated acts of harassment against the Mission. It is my Special Representative's assessment that these developments could endanger the security of the Mission's personnel and hamper UNOMIG's ability to implement its mandate. To counter such developments, the Mission has stepped up its media programme on both sides of the Inguri River.

22. In the Zugdidi area, furthermore, the mission has been criticized by members of the community of the internally displaced persons in the Zugdidi area, who seemed to believe that the observers had not done enough to help avoid the recent hostilities. Such sentiments are also directed against the CIS peacekeeping force and the Government of Georgia.

23. The weekly quadripartite meetings chaired by the Commander of the CIS peacekeeping force have continued during the reporting period. It will be recalled that these meetings bring together the Chief Military Observer of UNOMIG and representatives of the Georgian and Abkhaz police, militia and security services, and local administration to discuss security and other issues affecting both sides at the local level. While the Georgian side had rarely attended these meetings, following the May hostilities it has attended regularly.

24. UNOMIG continues to cooperate with United Nations programmes, non-governmental organizations and humanitarian agencies working in Abkhazia, Georgia. It regularly shares information with them and provides them with escorts on the M-27 when requested and when it is operationally feasible.

V. COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER MISSION IN GEORGIA AND THE COLLECTIVE PEACEKEEPING FORCES OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES

25. To the best of its ability under the present circumstances, UNOMIG continues to observe the operations of the CIS peacekeeping force within the framework of the implementation of the 14 May 1994 Agreement. In a spirit of cooperation, UNOMIG and the force has held frequent and regular meetings to discuss matters affecting their respective activities and to agree on mutual assistance.

VI. SITUATION ON THE GROUND

A. General

26. Since I last reported to the Council (S/1998/497), the situation in the Zugdidi and Gali restricted weapons and security zones remains unsettled and tense. While the ceasefire brokered on 25 May is generally holding, sporadic incidents of exchange of fire and mine attacks have continued in the Gali

sector. Such attacks, many of which are seemingly orchestrated by armed groups operating from the Georgian side of the Inguri River, are directed largely against the CIS peacekeeping force and the Abkhaz authorities. One very serious incident took place on 12 July, when an unknown armed group ambushed a patrol of the CIS peacekeeping force, killing five soldiers and injuring three others. The burning of houses in the Gali district continued for some time following the May hostilities. However, it seems that, while in areas where armed groups were suspected to have operated, the majority of houses has been destroyed, in other locations where the local population cooperated with the Abkhaz authorities, the houses remained intact.

B. Security and restricted weapons zone

27. The Gali district appears to be under the effective control of the Abkhaz authorities. The Abkhaz militia have established posts along the Inguri River with a few checkpoints in the inner part of the district. The militia, who are drawn from throughout Abkhazia and are deployed without adequate logistic support and rations, tend to prey on the local population and the land to support themselves. Of late, and following UNOMIG's extensive reporting on the situation, the CIS peacekeeping force and the Abkhaz authorities have intervened and the looting appears to have diminished.

28. In the Zugdidi sector, a gradual reinforcement of forces belonging to the Georgian Ministry of Interior and the police of the Abkhaz Government-in-exile has been observed. UNOMIG assesses, however, that the posture of these forces is defensive.

29. Both sides continue to violate the 14 May 1994 Agreement. The Georgian authorities and the Abkhaz side persistently deny UNOMIG access to the heavy weapons storage sites; several incidents of restriction of movement have been reported; and movement of armoured vehicles into the security and restricted weapons zones and visits by personnel of the armed forces of both sides continue to be cited. UNOMIG's repeated protests of these violations have gone unheeded by both sides.

C. Kodori Valley

30. Council members will recall that, for security reasons, the Mission's patrolling to the Kodori Valley has been temporarily suspended. However, neither the CIS peacekeeping force nor the Abkhaz authorities have reported any violations of the 14 May 1994 Agreement.

VII. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS

31. The economy in Georgia continues its steady recovery. This fiscal year, Georgia is expected to maintain the positive economic trend it has achieved in 1997 (S/1998/51, para. 31 and S/1998/375, para. 39) and all major macroeconomic indicators will most likely continue to be stable, including in particular a low inflation rate that should favour foreign investment. The only exception to

this positive trend is the delay in the conclusion of negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, which will delay payment to Georgia of some of the international loans due in 1998. However, it is anticipated that the delay will not have a significant impact on the Georgian economy, since the budget is becoming increasingly less dependent on disbursements of international loans to maintain internal stability and equilibrium.

32. Social conditions continue to be a major concern for the Georgian authorities. The payment of social benefits and access to social services are still limited, causing severe hardship for vulnerable groups, particularly the orphans and the elderly. The need to maintain equilibrium between public expenditures and internal revenue will hamper progress in this area in the near future.

33. In Abkhazia, however, economic conditions continue to deteriorate. The rich agricultural land of the Gali district, which used to feed most of Abkhazia and provide products for export, is not being worked, as the district is now virtually depopulated.

VIII. FINANCIAL ASPECTS

34. By its resolution 52/242 of 26 June 1998, the General Assembly appropriated an amount of $19,439,280 (gross), equivalent to $1,619,940 per month for UNOMIG for the period from 1 July 1998 to 30 June 1999. The assessment of these amounts is subject to the decision of the Security Council to extend the mandate of the Mission. In addition, in my report dated 18 June 1998 (S/1998/497/Add.1), I informed the Security Council that the financial implications for increasing the protected vehicle fleet of UNOMIG would be approximately $1.1 million.

35. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of UNOMIG beyond 31 July 1998, as recommended in paragraph 41 below, the cost of maintaining the Mission until 31 January 1999 would be limited to the appropriation contained in General Assembly resolution 52/242. I shall report to the General Assembly on the additional requirements needed, if any, for the maintenance of the Mission beyond 31 July 1998.

36. As at 30 June 1998, unpaid assessed contributions to the UNOMIG Special Account amounted to $6.4 million. The total of outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations at that date amounted to $1.5 billion.

IX. OBSERVATIONS

37. During the reporting period, my Special Representative, as well as the Russian Federation, in its capacity as facilitator, were forced to address one immediate crisis after another, caused by the lack of willingness on the part of both sides to renounce violence and seriously consider peaceful options for the resolution of the conflict. Some 40,000 people from the Gali district had to seek refuge for the second time on the other side of the Inguri River, and the

international community had to witness how its assistance and efforts literally went up in flames, when houses that had been constructed at a cost of more than $2 million out of UNHCR funds were deliberately set on fire. I deplore such reprehensible acts, whose motive appears to be to expel people from their home areas.

38. As the situation on the ground is tense and the risk of new confrontations is high, I have asked my Special Representative to make démarches to both sides to prevent the resumption of hostilities. He is also maintaining liaison with the parties in order to consider the organization of another high-level meeting in Geneva with a view of bringing the Geneva process back on track.

39. In his letter of 10 July 1998 (S/1998/633), the President of the Security Council informed me that the members of the Council supported the practical measures envisaged in my report of 10 June (S/1998/497) to strengthen the security of UNOMIG. He informed me that the members reiterated their deep concern regarding the security of the Mission. They also noted the measures already taken to improve security conditions to minimize the danger to mission personnel and to create conditions for the implementation of its mandated tasks, while underlining the need to continue to make further arrangements in this field. In this regard, and bearing in mind that the self-protection unit option was not accepted by the Abkhaz side and that neither party supported the option that UNOMIG be reduced to the minimal possible presence, I have instructed my Special Representative and the Chief Military Observer to keep the matter under constant review.

40. In this context, I condemn attacks against peacekeepers of the United Nations and the CIS and reiterate that protection of unarmed United Nations military observers rests with the parties. Both sides still have to make substantial efforts to contain the threat on the ground. Activities in the Gali sector by armed groups, who operate from the Georgian side of the Inguri River and whose attacks against the Abkhaz authorities and the CIS peacekeeping force inevitably affect the Mission's operations, require a determined effort by the Georgian authorities to contain them. At the same time, the Abkhaz side must do much more than it has done to protect the Mission elsewhere in Abkhazia and the recent harassment campaign launched against UNOMIG there will only exacerbate the situation on the ground.

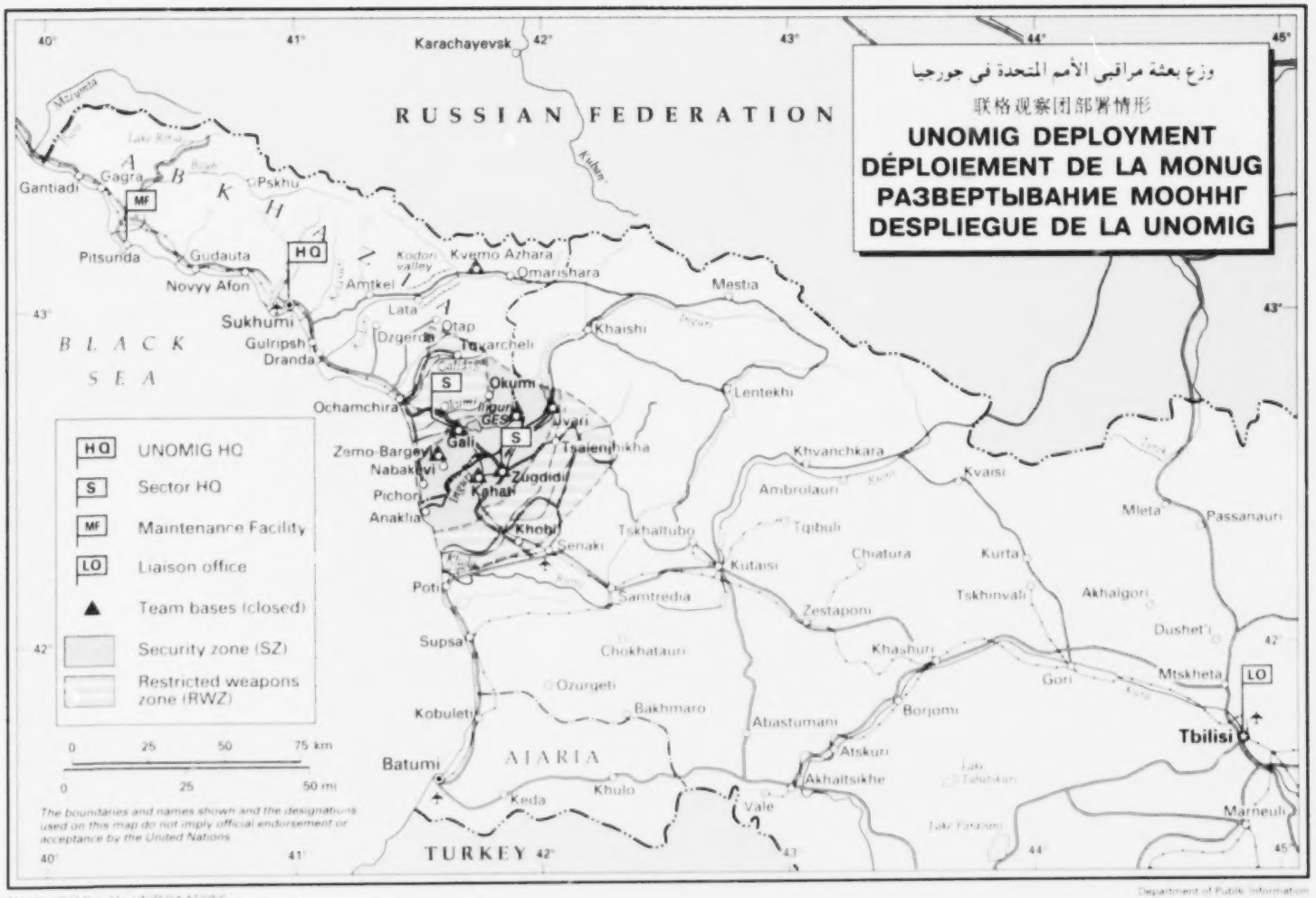
41. During the past six months, since the Council last extended the Mission's mandate, UNOMIG's ability to operate smoothly has been further hampered. Nevertheless, it has been proven time and again that its presence is essential. Not only does the Mission's presence continue to be a stabilizing factor in the area and to provide useful support for the political process, but it also helps to create a sense of confidence and security among the local population of the Gali district, to which most of the refugees and internally displaced persons are expected to return, and to prevent further abuse of the population by Abkhaz militia and armed groups. Accordingly, I recommended that the Security Council extend the mandate of the Mission for a further period of six months terminating on 31 January 1999, subject to a review by the Council of the mandate of UNOMIG in the event of any changes that might be made in the mandate or in the presence of the CIS peacekeeping force.

42. In conclusion, I should like to take this opportunity to thank my Special Representative, Mr. Liviu Bota, and all the civilian and military personnel of UNOMIG, for their continued dedication and perseverance in carrying out, under difficult and often dangerous conditions, the tasks entrusted to them by the Security Council.

Annex

Composition of United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia as at 10 July 1998

Country	Military observers
Albania	1
Austria	4
Bangladesh	9
Czech Republic	4
Denmark	5
Egypt	3
France	0
Germany	9
Greece	4
Hungary	5
Indonesia	4
Jordan	5
Pakistan	6
Poland	3
Republic of Korea	3
Russian Federation	3
Sweden	4
Switzerland	3
Turkey	0
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	1
United States of America	2
Uruguay	3
Total	81



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